Processes of enhanced self-understanding during a counseling programme for parents of children with disabilities


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Introduction: The stress and burden on parents of children with disabilities are well documented, and the parents’ way of handling the situation is crucial to the health and well-being of all family members, including the child with special needs. We conducted a group-based counselling programme for parents, mainly based on Gestalt education and personal construct theories, aiming at increasing the parents’ ability to cope better with the situation.

Method: The aim of this study was to explore the parents’ experiences from their processes of change related to the counselling programme. This qualitative study is based on modified grounded theory. The study examines the experiences of 67 parents (of them, 29 fathers) of children with disabilities after they had finished their sessions of the counselling programme. Data were collected in nine focus-group interviews.

Results: The categories developed were: Feeling motivated to communicate; Describing oneself in new words; Being inspired to experience one’s own emotions; Being more present and in charge and Making a difference by taking new steps. The core category was Improved handling of the situation by enhanced self-understanding. The parents needed security, but also challenge to experience more of ones’ own emotions, thoughts and bodily reactions. Existential issues also made them able to find new priorities and possibilities to handle the situation.

Conclusions: The parents described how processes of awareness and self-reflection were supported by being together with others who had relevant experiences, but also by the involvement of skilled, challenging counsellors. Being able to detect more of what was important to them and recognise ones’ own reaction were essential to their process towards enhanced self-understanding. The enhanced self-understanding helped them to new priorities, possibilities and new ways of acting. These experiences might be relevant for the conduction of future counselling support to parents of children with disabilities.